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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: NORTH KOREA

Summary: Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies focused June 25 news coverage on the aftermath of a recent Taiwan government decision to upgrade and merge several cities and counties; on the continuous probe into the legal cases involving former President Chen Shui-bian; on the Cabinet's order to decriminalize prostitution Wednesday; and on the Department of Health's plan to announce the opening of the Taiwan market to U.S. beef. In terms of editorials and commentaries, an op-ed piece in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times," written by a Taipei-based Western columnist, discussed China's role in the Six Party talks. The article said Beijing is "exploiting its ambiguous relationship with Pyongyang" because "it helps bolster its image as a positive force in the region while it gains concessions from the U.S. and others on core issues such as human rights and, above all, Taiwan." End summary.

"Beijing Makes Itself Indispensable"

1J. Michael Cole, a writer based in Taipei, opined in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] (6/25):

"Ever since the Agreed Framework signed in 1994 between the administration of former US president Bill Clinton and North Korea crumbled in 2002, Beijing -- Pyongyang's principal backer -- has successfully positioned itself as an indispensable ally in global efforts to denuclearize its neighbor. Throughout the years, China has come to be seen as a convener of the Six Party talks and, given its relations with Pyongyang, as a lever to keep Kim Jong-il's regime from sparking war in the Korean Peninsula. China's involvement in the Six Party talks has conveniently dovetailed with its attempts to reassure its neighbors - and the West - that it is rising peacefully, and that as an emerging power it is ready to act as a responsible stakeholder. At the same time, Beijing has also managed to serve as a buffer and to mitigate international responses to Pyongyang's long streak of seemingly irrational brinkmanship. For both sides in the conflict, therefore, China has increasingly become an indispensable moderator, a counterbalance reining in North Korea when it threatens to act out of bounds, and pacifying jittery South Korea, Japan and the US when Pyongyang conducts nuclear tests or launches ballistic missiles.

"... Beijing is unlikely to have assumed its role as moderator out of altruism, and its position has been beneficial to its image. In the process it has managed to extract concessions in a way that is reminiscent of the gains it made when the administration of former US president Richard Nixon sought its help in the Cold War (to isolate the Soviet Union) and the Vietnam War (to stop supporting North Vietnamese), a precedent that should not escape our attention. Washington, meanwhile, has helped to reinforce Beijing's image of itself as an indispensable ally and become unhealthily dependent on Chinese participation in the disarmament talks, often at the expense of regional allies. ...

"Long used to a style of diplomacy in which political gifts come at a price, Beijing is fully aware of the West's growing dependence on

it regarding North Korea and has used its position to soften Washington's support for Taiwan. This could explain the George W. Bush administration's volte-face after 2001, drifting from strong support for Taiwan to nearly constant condemnation of the Chen Shui-bian administration. (The timing of Bush's change of heart on Taiwan and escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula could not be more apt.) ... Many experts have drawn the conclusion that despite close diplomatic relations and economic ties, Beijing has been unable to influence the North's decisions on its nuclear program. A less explored possibility is that Beijing is exploiting its ambiguous relationship with Pyongyang to create some sort of status quo in which the North Korea nuclear issue is never fully resolved, because an end to the conflict would severely diminish Beijing's ability to bargain with the international community. ...

"It is evident, therefore, that the perpetuation of the status quo is in Beijing's advantage, as it helps bolster its image of a positive force in the region while it gains concessions from the US and others on core issues such as human rights and, above all, Taiwan. This is not to say that China relishes a nuclear North Korea that could spark a destabilizing war in the Korean Peninsula. But if it manages its neighbor well - not allowing it to spark a war while preventing the international community from disarming it, effectively playing one camp against the other - Pyongyang can be used by Beijing as a precious instrument to buttress the foundations of its rise while achieving its political objectives. Ironically, over-reliance on China by Japan, South Korea and the US on the North Korean nuclear issue could make it less likely that the problem will be resolved, and more probable that they will end up giving too much to ensure that China continues its 'indispensable' role."

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